



10 December 2023

NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS TAKE A LEAF OUT OF HISTORY

- **Decorations at Castle Fraser will transport visitors through Christmas past, from Medieval to Victorian times**
- **Festive foliage like holly, ivy, pine and oak used in period decorations had symbolic meanings**
- **Castle Fraser's period decorations can be viewed until 18 December when the property closes**

The National Trust for Scotland will be celebrating the festive season with a truly authentic Christmas at Castle Fraser in Aberdeenshire by creating beautiful, historically accurate decorations, in keeping with the period property to provide a magical experience for visitors.

The conservation charity has produced new decoration ideas, based on archive materials, for its properties to create fabulous festive adornments that draw upon historical events and social history. The guidance, being trialled at Castle Fraser, Inverurie, one of Scotland's largest tower houses, references appropriate events, time periods and details of social history so that stunning installations can be recreated to provide inspiring heritage visitor experiences in line with the Trust's engagement objectives as part of its 10-year strategy, Nature, Beauty and Heritage for Everyone.

The extensive research carried out by Dr Jo Riley, one of the Trust's visitor service assistants in the Collections Care team, encapsulates the ethos of the time when period properties used resources from their estates, such as seasonal foliage from the garden for decorating, allowing the property and its grounds to complement each other. Reinforcing the Trust's conservation agenda, Dr Riley has been working with the Trust's Curator North, Vikki Duncan and gardeners to develop authentic decorations using sustainable materials from the castle's estate that reflect the style of different periods in history.

Dr Riley said: "Many of the customs and traditions relating to how homes were decorated and used during the festive season of mid-winter, originate before Christianity. They have been adopted and adapted over time, influenced by culture and religion. Many of the winter celebrations we enjoy today have interesting histories and ancient origins. A lot of the customs we enjoy at this festive time of year have evolved from Pagan practices, have been influenced by other cultures and developed through religious turbulence and beliefs. Pagan celebrations focused around the winter solstice,

which takes place on December 21st. Later, Vikings arrived bringing with them their customs that related to Jól (Yule), a twelve-day period over the darkest time of the year.

“We have created period, seasonal decorations for Castle Fraser that will transport visitors through the ages; from the Medieval Period which will be centred around the Great Hall, moving into the Georgian Period in the Dining Room, and progressing to the Victorian Sitting Room where the festive legacy of this era will be portrayed.”

Different types of decorations were used to adorn homes across Scotland throughout history, with some of the most popular including:

- **Garlands** – traditionally hung in halls and over doors where people would walk under them, and in doing so, would bring good fortune and blessings. Hung around fireplaces, they reinforced the significance of the fire during yuletide.
- **Kissing balls** – popular in the Middle Ages, they originally contained a clay figure of Jesus at the centre. Also referred to as ‘holy boughs’ they would be hung from ceilings and passageways. It was believed that those who passed under the boughs were blessed. The inclusion of mistletoe brought with it the tradition of kissing under the arrangement. The rise of the Puritan Church in the 17th centuries meant, with their pagan connotations, kissing balls fell out of favour.
- **Wreaths** – derived from the English word ‘withen’ meaning to twist, the tradition dates back to the ancient Romans and Greeks. During winter celebrations both Vikings and Pagans used to adorn their homes with wreaths. Holly wreaths were seen to represent to crown of thorns worn by Jesus. Wreaths were commonly used in the 19th Century with the symbolic custom of the advent wreath and the display of a ‘welcome ring’ on a front door.
- **Pomander** – originally they were elaborate accessories, fashioned by silversmiths that contained pleasant, perfumed concoctions. The name pomander derives from the French ‘pomme d’amber’, which is interpreted as ‘apples of ambergris’, ambergris being the sweet-smelling substance used to bind the perfumed ingredients together. The clove-studded orange became popular as a yuletide gift during the 17th and 18th centuries. It was associated with health and good luck and were hung around the home to provide a pleasing aroma.

Dr Riley added: “The language of plants and flowers has been significant throughout history. Their relevance being passed on from one set of beliefs to the next. Many plants were incorporated into seasonal displays because of their symbolic meanings, as a means of conveying a message, bringing luck or adhering to superstition.”

The typical types of foliage used for festive decorations and their symbolic meanings include:

- **Evergreens** – synonymous with the seasonal decorations, their display of green leaves represents immortality and nature’s strength during the winter months. The tradition of bringing evergreens into homes pre-dates Christianity and has continued to be popular.

- **Rowan** – during winter celebrations it has been customary in Scotland to burn a twig from a rowan tree to ward off feelings of jealousy and dispel mistrust between friends and family.
- **Mistletoe** – considered sacred since early solstice celebrations, it has connotations with fertility, healing, life, peace and happiness. While not native to Scotland its popularity over Christmas may have meant those in high society had it sent from England.
- **Yew Tree** – represents the death of the old year and is also considered as a connection between this world and the next.
- **Oak Tree** – was valued for being long lived and symbolic of eternal life, they represented protection, strength and endurance. The trunk from an oak tree was traditionally used for the Celtic tradition of burning the yule log.
- **Birch Trees** – denotes new beginnings.
- **Cedar** – represents healing.
- **Holly** – thought to provide protection and bring good luck.
- **Ivy** – thought to have healing properties it is symbolic of faithfulness and associated with marriage
- **Juniper** – blessed by Mary after a juniper bush opened up to hide the holy family as they fled from King Herod's soldiers, it thus signifies protection.
- **Laurel** – favours a conquest over pain and suffering.
- **Pine** – indicative of peace, healing and joy.
- **Pinecones, seeds and nuts** – denotes birth and rebirth.
- **Rosemary** – the herb of the sun.

Dr Riley will be discussing her research into Christmas traditions and period decorations with the Trust president Jackie Bird on the latest episode of the *Love Scotland* podcast, released on Friday 9 December. The podcast, now in its 4th series, recently picked up 'Podcast of the Year' and 'Brand Extension of the Year' awards at the prestigious Professional Publishing Association (PPA) Awards in Edinburgh on 30 November. To listen to the podcast, please visit <https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/for-the-love-of-scotland-podcasts>.

Visitors to Castle Fraser, its garden and estate can enjoy the seasonal period decorations until 18 December when the castle will close until Spring 2023, with the garden and grounds of the estate open all year round.

This work contributes to the National Trust for Scotland's vision to delivery Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone. Its 10-year strategy, refocuses its vision of caring for, sharing, and conserving Scotland's heritage, contributing to its conservation and engagement objectives, specifically to enrich Scotland's protected heritage to make it

relevant to more people and be a leading provider of inspiring heritage visitor experiences.

Read more about the strategy at: <https://www.nts.org.uk/our-work/our-strategy>